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Spring 2016 Second Prize Essay

“PEOPLE EXPERIENCE MANY DIFFERENT KINDS OF CONFLICT IN LIFE.”

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People experience many different kinds of conflict in life. One of the most personal conflicts, however, is the “person vs. self” conflict. Here, tension exists between one’s internal self, or thoughts, and the external self, or the person who encounters and interacts with the world. How one relates to herself and how one relates to the outside world can often be very different, and one of the “selves” might be overwhelmed or overlooked by the other. In Lucille Clifton’s “it was a dream”, for instance, the speaker’s internal self is frustrated in a dream, and is seemingly resentful of the self presented to the outside world. In Diane Glancy’s Flutie, Flutie herself struggles to speak and express her internal thoughts; this struggle is a constant source of shame and discontent in Flutie’s life as she disappoints her teachers and family. Silence and expression allow Clifton and Glancy, as the authors, to explore the conflict between the external and internal self through different mediums: Clifton’s speaker through her dreams and Flutie through her stories.

Clifton paints a picture of the internal conflict the speaker faces by punctuating and organizing her sentences almost wildly. The poem’s overall structure is broken by the question “what” (line 7) in the middle of the poem. The isolation of this word emphasizes the question, and also separates the external and internal selves. Such separation shows a contrast between the possibly contrite external self, ashamed of how she interacts with the world, and the accusatory internal self in order to make the reader feel the frustration that exists between the two selves. The organization of the poem emphasizes the conflict between the two. Furthermore, the repetition of the word “wild” (lines 10 - 11) paints a clear picture of how the speaker feels internally. Perhaps the internal self is frustrated because the external self of the speaker is reserved, silent, or overlooked, like Glancy’s voiceless Flutie. The begging of the external self and the word wild creates a clear image of the depth of the conflict within the speaker - one self contrite and confused, the other wild and full of rage. Finally, Clifton punctuates the final line of the poem with three capitalized words: “This. This. This.” (line 14). The external self is seeking to control the internal self here by asking it to ask before acting, to think before speaking, to reflect. This demand for self-reflection and questioning seem to emphasize that the speaker’s internal self values self-awareness, which the external self may be ignoring.

While the poem’s structure gives clues about the internal - external self conflict, the word choices show that emotion drives how the speaker defines herself in Clifton’s “it was a dream”. For instance, the “whirling gyre of rage” (line 5) makes the internal self seem infected with a chaotic, almost flammable anger. Later, the external self “screamed” (line 14) at the internal self, clearly in anger. The imagery created by these word choices emphasize anger, as well as accusation. The external self’s “extra finger” “accuses” (lines 3 - 4) the speaker; accusing oneself of some fault highlights the conflict between the selves. Because the internal self seems so angry and unafraid of outbursts, the speaker might be soft and quiet on the outside, but again, like Glancy’s Flutie, her internal self wants her to speak out. Or, perhaps, the “greater self” (line 1) is simply the conscience of the speaker. This idea is made more plausible because the external self is begging or “pleading” (line 8) for answers from the internal self. The pleading shows distress

and sadness. There is a direct contrast in emotions between the sad external and the angry internal self. Ultimately, the speaker's emotions and the contrast between the inner wild woman that wants to be heard and the distressed external self that pleads "Oh what could I have done?" (line 9) define her internal conflict.

While Clifton's speaker's conflict is clear in word choice and emotional language, Glancy's Flutie expresses who she is and interacts with her world by telling stories. Flutie's story begins when she discovers the story of Philomela and appropriates it to make the story her own. Philomela's tongue was cut out, by her sister's husband who raped her; the sister sees Philomela's tapestry, created to tell the story, and ultimately escapes with Philomela; as they escape the husband, they turn into birds who are free as they fly away (p. 36 - 38). Although Philomela could not speak, she weaves her story into a tapestry much like Flutie, deathly afraid to speak in class, creates stories in her head. Through the story of Philomela, Flutie discovers that stories can reveal a person's inner thoughts. Not only does Flutie create her own internal stories, but she also attempts to get her parents to tell her stories, too. Unfortunately, Flutie discovers that "Nothing else could be counted on. Except poverty and her father's distance when she wanted to know about him. When she wanted him to tell his stories" (Glancy 17). Her father hides himself away and refuses to tell stories. Flutie feels as though she did not know who her father was, and with so little information about her heritage, Flutie struggles to understand who she was, too.

Just as a story can give information, the same story is limited unless the self completes it. For instance, Flutie tells stories to herself in order to define herself. She eventually learns that stories are limited, when told by others: "That's what's wrong with stories. They only told part. She had to listen, and later think about the story, and fill in the rest. She had to interpret. To decide where the story went" (Glancy 128). Just as Flutie creates stories to define herself, she also uses stories to connect with others, so that she can understand them in relation to her and who she is. As she fills in the holes in stories about others, Flutie transforms those same stories to project her own thoughts and ideas to the world.

Though she defines herself by creating stories, through symbolism, Flutie paints a clearer picture of who she is and who she wants to be. She also identifies her challenges in this way. Flutie's symbolism is closely tied to nature and the world beyond her own self, because of her Native American heritage. This is a stark contrast to Clifton's speaker, whose symbolism exists almost in isolation, in a void where the internal-external conflict takes place. For instance, the deer image repeats in Glancy's work frequently because Flutie identifies herself as the deer - quiet, graceful, and scared. She writes stories that begin with "A deer came from the woods. It had a mouth, but couldn't talk" (Glancy 37) or "A deer came from the water. She was brown. She had no tongue" (Glancy 98). Flutie's deer is silent because deer do not speak, therefore representing the idea that Flutie herself cannot talk to others, even though she and the deer both have mouths.

In addition to representing herself as a deer, Flutie represents the force that keeps her from speaking as water. Whether this force is something internal, like in the Clifton poem, or something external that terrifies Flutie, the water is a powerful and stifling force. The water seems to stifle Flutie's mouth, such as when "I open my mouth. I am a deer. My deer in the water swims for the air" (Glancy 101). Here, rather than exploring how she, herself, is stifled like Clifton's speaker did, Flutie expresses her challenge through the deer's struggle in the water. To Flutie, just like the deer struggles in the water to breathe, she struggles to speak in the classroom. Flutie's fear is so overpowering that the water controls her constantly: "She was in class and something needed to be said. But she knew if she spoke, she would feel the water" (Glancy 86). The water overpowers Flutie, it threatens who she is. But, as part of the natural world, and because of her connection to the natural world, the water is also part of herself. In the same way, Clifton's speaker's conflict is clearly one of internal vs. external, with the internal self angry, threatening the

external self like the water threatens Flutie. Even the anger of the water and the internal voice are similar. Though Flutie calls her fear an “underwater volcano erupting after building up for years” (Glancy 86), and Clifton did not use natural imagery, the anger of the “gyre of rage” and the “underwater volcano” seem to be similar in how they represent the internal challenges of Flutie and the speaker.

Flutie and Clifton’s speaker are plagued by powerful internal voices, desperate to be expressed. For Flutie, her silence tells a story that was louder than her voice; even crying plays a role in her tale because silence “was what she spoke. Not words. But tears. Melted words. She was a sweat-lodge rock in the morn. And under the tears was her anger in knowing that she couldn’t talk when it counted” (Glancy 25). Flutie’s inability to speak angers her because without a voice she cannot express who she is. In the same way, the internal voice of Clifton’s speaker is angry as well. That self is wild and savage, angry at how the external self acted - or, like Flutie, did not act. Furthermore, Flutie is desperate to talk because she knew who she is and she feels that by speaking she would be able to share herself and connect with the world. Flutie knew that “not speaking was a wall before her. She couldn’t climb it. She knew her failure. She would be locked in it forever. The thought burned her head” (Glancy 97). Just as Flutie’s head burns in shame at her inability to talk, the internal voice of Clifton’s speaker is angry because of the lack of self-awareness of the external voice. The external voice “pleaded with her, could i do, oh what could i have done?” (Line 8) because the external self is still desperate for her internal world to be shared. In the same way, Flutie sees herself as stuck between two worlds, as never moving forward. Her silence traps her, even though her story exists in the same way that the speaker’s internal voice is trapped by the external self’s actions or beliefs.

Conflict between the internal and external self in Clifton’s “it was a dream” and Glancy’s Flutie is expressed through silence, word choice, and emotion. Clifton’s dialogue between the internal and external selves highlights the conflict between hidden emotions and the argument surrounding self-awareness. Diane Glancy’s character Flutie struggles to speak, and is only able to express who she is through stories; these same stories both express her internal self and connect her to the wider world. This “person vs. self” conflict is universal, yet when the reader sees the frustration between the internal and external selves, she is reminded to review her own life. These stories provide different examples of struggles that result from this conflict; though expressed in different ways, Flutie through stories and the speaker through a dream, ultimately, this human experience of conflict connects the works of literature and the reader.

Work Cited

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